SOUTHERN PIONEERS IN SOCIAL INTERPRETATION

VI. WOODROW WILSON: A CHALLENGE TO THE FIGHTING SOUTH

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THE EPOS of Woodrow Wilson came to a climax so thunderous that it has absorbed attention almost to the complete exclusion of all that preceded it. An article on Woodrow Wilson without reference to the war, or to the League of Nations, may seem to many readers as preposterous as an essay on Agamemnon without reference to the siege of Troy. This is unfortunate, for by the absorption of the President into the Internationalist, the United States and particularly the South loses a figure of outstanding social significance. The Wilson in the Hall of the Clock at Versailles may have been merely a projection of the Wilson in the White House, and the Wilson in the State House at Trenton, and the Wilson in the President's house at Princeton; but his significance in the palace of the French kings is almost entirely unrelated to his significance in the houses built by the people which he occupied in the United States.

A leader of American democracy as dictator of a European peace congress was admittedly an anomaly. Mr. Wilson's presence at Versailles was due to a combination of circumstances unparallelled in history, and a combination which we are permitted to hope we shall never see again. It was not in any sense due to the orderly development of the social consciousness of any people that Mr. Wilson was called upon to play his part upon the European stage. He was thrust upon that stage by forces entirely uncontrollable by the people of the United States, or by any other single nation. He was selected to be President of the United States by the deliberate choice of the people of the United States. He was selected to be the most conspicuous figure at the Peace Conference by a destiny which the people of the United States could neither foresee nor control.

As a social force of significance to democracy, his career before the war is therefore much more important than his career after the storm had burst. To devote attention exclusively to Wilson, the toy of destiny, is to lose sight of a man who expressed with singular clearness and felicity the social consciousness of his time. The nation can ill afford to suffer such a loss. To the South it is desperately heavy, for at this moment of its great expansion, materially and intellectually, it requires as never before careful study of the counsel of all its conspicuously able leaders. It is well worth the while of the South to scrutinize closely the record of this man irrespective of his attitude as an internationalist and to consider to what extent his leadership was effective in the South in matters not pertaining to the war and its aftermath.

It is no part of the purpose of this paper to review in detail the economic and political ideas of Woodrow Wilson. Partisan controversialists

have so completely befogged that record that it will tax the resources of able historians for years to get at the truth. Much of it, indeed, is irrelevant to a discussion of the man as a social pioneer. It is intended here to consider rather the underlying faith that was the basis of his actions and to compare it with the underlying faith that seems to be the basis of the social policy of the section that produced Woodrow Wilson. About this, there is little obscurity. As long as the history of the United States is studied, men will doubtless continue to differ about the effectiveness of Wilson's domestic policy, as they will certainly differ about the effectiveness of his foreign policy. As to what he did, it is far too early to dogmatize, but as to what he intended to do there is not much dispute.

There is a consistency in this record that is not only easily traced, but that is so conspicuous that it is impossible to miss it. From the time of his assault on the eating clubs at Princeton to the time of his appeal to the Italian people over the head of Orlando, Woodrow Wilson maintained his faith, not in the righteousness only, but in the efficacy of democracy. In "The Road Away from Revolution," almost his last public utterance, he ascribed the Russian debacle to the fact that "The lives of the great mass of the Russian people contained no opportunities, but were hemmed in by barriers against which they were constantly flinging their spirits, only to fall back bruised and dispirited." This conception of the common people as constantly flinging their spirits against the barriers which hem them in, is surely as high an expression of the democratic ideal as ever was uttered. Grant that the people are battering at their barriers, and idealism is not only justified, but becomes the sole rational philosophy.

Can it be seriously maintained, though, that any such conception is held by the existing leadership of any section of the country? Since the South is the specific subject of these essays, confine the inquiry to the South. If Southern leaders actually believed that the great mass of the common people of the section are flinging their spirits against the barriers that hem them in, where would be the excuse for timidity, for time-serving opportunism, for obscurantism and reaction? Such faults and failures of leadership are inconsistent with a profound belief that the people are surging against the barriers that restrain them from the freer and nobler life of the idealist's dreams.

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The decade since 1914 has been a decade of disillusionment the world over. Perhaps never since Jean-Jacques first inflamed the idealists of France has the intellectual response to the concept of democracy been feebler or more uncertain than it is at present. Passionate enthusiasm is always with the opposition, and democracy is now the party in power.

It is conceivable that the future historian may set down the year 1914 as the high tide of democracy; for ever since its assumption of complete control of the world assaults upon it have been increasing in frequency and vigor. But in 1914 Wilsonian idealism had not yet received a single real body-blow. If Wilson's leadership had ever been effective in his native section one would reasonably expect to find it effective at the moment of its highest power in the rest of the country.

What are the facts? At the Baltimore convention in 1912 the South put up a tremendous fight for the nomination of Oscar W. Underwood, although Wilson received some of its delegates. At the election in November of that year Wilson actually polled a smaller number of votes than Bryan had polled in 1896 in the states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Tennessee, Missouri and Arkansas, and a smaller number than Bryan had polled in 1900 in Alabama. Every one of those states showed a material gain in population between 1900 and 1910, and the figures cannot have been affected by the disfranchisement of the negroes since the negroes never voted the Democratic ticket in appreciable numbers. The only possible explanation is that the enthusiasm of the South for Wilson at the height of his popularity never approached its enthusiasm for Bryan at the height of *his* popularity. In view of that fact that Wilson was generally believed to be a Democrat who could actually win, this refusal of the South to rally to him can be accounted for only on the hypothesis that there existed in the section a profound distaste for the man and his ideas.

since the extinction of the Confederate States of America has been in the nature of degeneration

In support of that theory there is the record of many Southern representatives and senators during Wilson's administration. Their opposition to the administration was notorious, but they were regularly returned to their seats in Washington by their constituencies. In Georgia, indeed, Thomas E. Watson won on a platform of opposition to Wilsonism more rabid than that of Hoke Smith.

The fact is, no candid observer doubts that if Underwood had been nominated by the Baltimore convention, the South would have voted for him as readily as it voted for Wilson. Perhaps it would have voted more enthusiastically, on account of Underwood's residence in the South. Now to assume that Oscar W. Underwood and Woodrow Wilson thought alike because they were both called Democrats would be as fatuous as to assume that the last of the czars and Lenine thought alike because they were both called Nicholas. Mr. Underwood's social concepts may or may not be the prevailing mode of thought in the South. The point is, the very willingness of the South to vote for either man proves that Mr. Wilson's concepts did not at that time dominate it. The fact that it was willing to return to Washington time after time men who had opposed Mr. Wilson's social program at every step is proof that it was at best indifferent about the success of that program at the moment when the rest of the country came nearest to genuine excitement about it.

Mr. Wilson carried the South in the election of 1912, but Wilsonism was far from dominating it then.

Woodrow Wilson's faith in democracy was not, however, incompatible with faith in representative government. His intelligence rejected the concept of pure democracy as essentially fallacious. The very nature of the charge most frequently brought against him is conclusive proof of his willingness to accept responsibility. He is accused of autocracy, which is an accusation never brought against any man whose record in office is one of indecision and evasion. He sponsored the doctrine that a President of the United States is in fact leader of his party as well as chief executive, which was tantamount to assumption of responsibility for the legislative, as well as the executive, record of his administration.

In this he is followed in theory by the South, but it is becoming more and more the fashion for political parties and administrative officials to reject responsibility for any grave decision. The referendum, first proposed as a weapon for the people to employ against tyrannous officials, has recently threatened to become a means of escape for officials and legislative bodies from the necessity of making momentous decisions. Nothing in the record of democracy is clearer than the incapacity of the people to make wise decisions upon complicated questions involving technical details upon which all but expert opinion is worthless. Yet more and more frequently legislative bodies are referring such questions to the people for settlement at the polls.

This is the antithesis of Wilsonian doctrine. His bitterest enemies do not deny that he was courageous, and this policy is the off-spring of timidity in politics. The leadership that acts and then faces the consequences, instead of throwing back upon the people the responsibility that it should assume, is the only true leadership of representative democracy. The leadership that ducks and dodges, raising the specious cry of, "Let the people rule," was utterly abhorrent to Wilson, and travesties his spirit when it assumes to wear his colors.

A conspicuous cleavage between the political philosophy of Woodrow Wilson and the political philosophy of the present South is revealed by the war President's iconoclasm. Whatever else the South may be, it is not an image-breaker. Indeed, the most powerful foe of its advancement, materially, as well as mentally and morally, has rarely assumed human, or tangible form. It has been rather the dead hand of the past, a fixation of ideas arising from the notion that the Golden Age is behind, and not ahead.

No man of what the Victorian age called "sensibility" can fail to admire the magnificent loyalty of the South, but even loyalty, pushed to excess, becomes a vice. When it goes the length —as it has not infrequently gone in the South— of assuming that everything that has happened

and deterioration, loyalty becomes obscurantism, and a curse to the section it afflicts. A great past is a reproach to a nation that has no future.

After all, what the South thinks of its heroes is of trivial importance by comparison with what the heroes would think of the South, if they could return to it. It is creditable to the South that it rejects indignantly the mere suggestion that it repudiate Robert E. Lee; but it would be more to the purpose for the section to bend its energies to making sure that Robert E. Lee, if he were raised from the tomb, would not repudiate the South.

Think what the brave and chivalrous gentleman would say if he were told how white women have been stripped of their clothing and beaten by a mob of Southern white men wearing masks. Think of what the just and honorable officer would say if he were told that negroes have been hanged without trial in the South because they were suspected of having poisoned mules! Think of what the President of Washington College would say if he were given first the automobile statistics, and then the educational expenditures of his native section for the past year! It is no virtue for us to proclaim vociferously that Lee is good enough for us. Simple Simon can see that. What would puzzle Socrates to decide is, are we good enough for Lee?

That is the sort of question that interested Woodrow Wilson. He was a historian by profession. He knew the history of this country, including the South, far better than the average Southerner knows it; but few men have been less inclined to make an idol of history and to bow down before it. His impulse, on the contrary, was always to strike out in a new direction, to try something that had never been tried before, in the hope of achieving a success that had never been achieved before.

This spirit of adventure, of intellectual pioneering, certainly has not informed the South. It has not been wholly without effect, of course. The hopeful aspect of the situation is the fact that in many of the states below the Potomac there are conspicuous leaders who are Wilson men to the extent of believing in the incessant endeavor to break new paths, to attempt new tasks, if necessary to brave new dangers and to risk new failures. The discouraging aspect is that these leaders are so extremely conspicuous. If there were more of them, they would stand out less prominently.

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The man Wilson was an intellectual. To mention the fact is to classify him as outside the ranks, not in the South alone, but in any section of the country. His profound and intense religious convictions cannot be doubted by anyone who has paid the slightest heed to his utterances and writings, or observed his actions with any sort of understanding; nevertheless, he denied that any department of life is closed to the exercise of reason. Shortly before his death he wrote to an inquirer that he not only believed in the theory of evolution as applied to the origin of man, but was amazed that anyone should question it at this late date.

It seems to be pretty well established that the type of leadership that denies the right of man to employ his reason in every department of life wields greater influence in the South than in any other section of the country. Inferior obscurantists exist in multitudes everywhere, and occasionally one discovers the type in a position of great authority and prestige in other sections. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is in the South that one finds the larger number of formidable rulers, especially in the ecclesiastical and educational realms, who frankly and openly advocate shackling the reason in the presence of what they deem sacred subjects.

The blatant cynicism of the Southern theologue and educator of a certain type in denying the intellectual aspirations of Woodrow Wilson yields nothing to the cynicism of those senators who denied his international aspirations. One of the exquisite ironies of the age is the fact that some of these men, who are openly and shamelessly fighting against the ideal to which Wilson devoted the labor of a lifetime, find no language too blistering to be applied to Senator Lodge and others who fought against the League of Nations, to which Wilson gave about three of his sixty years. To classify such men as followers of Woodrow Wilson would be to admit that they may

> Compound for sins they are inclin'd to
> By damning those they have no mind to.

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It has not only been possible, in some quarters

it has been customary, to make every quality enumerated here the basis of an indictment of Woodrow Wilson. Even his stoutest admirers have deplored one other quality that must be added to the list, namely his combativeness. It may be that Woodrow Wilson was excessive in all his manifestations. None the less, without the very qualities which he is accused of carrying to excess, he never would have been the force that moved the world. "Your goodness must have some edge to it, else it is none" is a dictum accepted by the most conservative. There is no manner of doubt that Woodrow Wilson had an edge, and if in the end it sheared away some indispensable supporters, in the beginning it cut through a vast deal of opposition.

In so far as mere combativeness is concerned, the South suffers no lack of it. A fight can be picked pretty nearly anywhere at pretty nearly any time, if one is determined to have a fight, and is not fastidious as to his opponents or his cause. By proclaiming a certain viewpoint upon the negro question, or upon the Ku Klux Klan, or—in some states—upon partisan politics, one may precipitate any sort of combat, from a vigorous debate up to a clash in which the conclusive arguments are furnished by shotguns and bowie-knives. On certain questions the South will readily fight all comers in any and every fashion. But Woodrow Wilson would fight anybody on any question which he felt involved a principle. The South certainly does not follow him to that extreme. There is a broad region regarded as tabu by the average Southern leader, and it unfortunately includes some matters that ought to be discussed.

This is conspicuously true of any subject which happens to impinge upon religious dogma. To some extent the consideration that causes Southern leaders to walk warily in the presence of anything that can be tortured into a religious debate is the prudential consideration that it is better to let sleeping dogs lie. But it is open to question that that is the compelling motive in most cases. Beyond and behind that is another motive that has no relation whatever to personal safety or to constitutional pacificism. It is the reluctance of amiable and God-fearing men to attack the faith of weaker vessels. It is a thankless task to demolish illusions and to instill doubts and fears, and there is a widespread belief in the South that it is highly questionable ethically.

Obviously, a consideration of that sort occurs only to men who are thoroughly conscientious and essentially humble-minded. It does not for a moment restrain the fanatic and the ignoramus. The consequence is that too often they are permitted to rage through the land without the raising of a single effective protest. The broader minded and more intelligent leaders of Southern thought shrug their shoulders and hold their tongues. The stock excuse is, "Oh, well, these fellows no doubt do a certain amount of good among the classes they reach." For this problematical good, therefore, the certain and obvious evil that these men do is permitted. The net result is that the vigor and aggressiveness shown in the South in the field of ethical and religious ideas is almost completely monopolized by the least intelligent and most reactionary leaders in those fields. In such cases the Wilson men are the very men whom Woodrow Wilson would have least desired as followers.

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Above all, and behind all else, Wilson was a spiritual aristocrat. He spent his life fighting the battles of democracy, it is true; but what he strove for was political democracy, economic democracy, perhaps to some extent social democracy. Not for an instant did he adhere to the theory that democracy extends to things of the spirit. He believed that there are good men and bad men, and while he would submit to the political rule of what he regarded as bad men, he tolerated no suggestion that they had any right to extend their rule over his spirit. He bowed to the will of the majority; but so far from worshipping it, he had for it the most corrosive scorn when it seemed to him that it willed wickedness.

Mr. Wilson's intransigent attitude in his last great fight was due to the fact that in his eyes the establishment of the League of Nations transcended all politics and became a spiritual adventure, where compromise was to him unthinkable. Unfortunately for him, others regarded it as nothing of the sort, but a question of the most practical sort of politics. Thus he lost his fight, and is accused, not without reason, of having betrayed his own cause through excess of zeal.

Be that as it may, he left the world a record of tremendous strength of conviction. It is not inconceivable that in so doing he bequeathed to a skeptical age something more valuable than the political system he endeavored to establish. Certainly it is a record of enormous potential value to the South, if the South chooses to profit by it. Here was a man of brains and character who believed that it is the duty of brains and character to rule the world, or to go down fighting for empery. What a contrast to the pseudo-aristocracy, that will not soil its white fingers with deeds of violence to no matter what end!

We are prone to forget that "aristocracy" does not mean the existence of a superior class, but the rule of a superior class. He would be a pessimist indeed who would deny that a class superior, not on account of blood, but on account of brains and character, *exists* in the South; but he would be an optimist equally extreme who would dare to maintain that that class *rules* in the South. The superior class never has ruled and never will rule except where and when it was willing to fight. The ancient aristocracy that attained and maintained its dominance by means of the sword had a comparatively simple task, which required mainly physical strength and courage. The new aristocracy is faced by a problem infinitely more complex. It must assert and maintain its superiority by means of intellectual and moral weapons. But the fact that the style of warfare has changed does not mean that the fighting is any the less bitter. On the contrary it has, if anything, increased in ferocity, for no *Jacquerie* in human form ever was as bitter, as relentless, and as tireless as the evil spirits that the intellectual and moral aristocrat has to combat. Villeins and serfs once crushed would not rise again for many years. But ignorance, bigotry, intolerance and obscurantism are never weary and never sleep.

They have carved on Woodrow Wilson's tomb no effigy and no inscription, but simply a naked sword. It is a symbol of magnificent audacity to carve upon the sepulchre of the protagonist of peace. It recalls the audacity of another suggestion that comes perhaps somewhat too faintly down the centuries: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword!"

The South, God knows, has cause to be weary of wars. The doctrines of pacificism are wondrous sweet to her, still crippled by ancient wounds. It is no marvel that her leaders are still impressed with the belief that the highest patriotic service they can render is the suppression of strife, the avoidance of disputation, the rigorous ironing out of all dissent. But that doctrine grows pernicious when concord is purchased at the price of spiritual and moral compromise. The social significance of Woodrow Wilson is the fact that he stands as a tremendous denial of the doctrine that life is so dear and peace so sweet as to be worth purchase at the price of moral and intellectual chains and slavery.

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We call ourselves Wilson men in the South because we gave large majorities to the Democratic party, and because we are always ready to cheer an orator's mention of Wilson, as we cheer his mention of Lee. But in his lifetime what Lee needed at his back was not orators, but men-at-arms. What Wilson needed was not talkers, but fighters. The question has been raised as to whether the South is worthy of Lee. Is it any more worthy of Wilson? That question cannot be answered in words, but only in deeds, deeds done in the name of Wilson, who was a fighting man, a man, if you choose, of violence. If Wilson could speak to the Southerner who protests his devotion to the ideals of the dead leader, it is easy to imagine that he might listen without comment to all the oratory, and then reply in the words of a hero of an old-fashioned romance: "Sir, I am waiting for you to draw."